

MEMORANDUM

TO: Students & former students
FROM: Prof. Thaddeus Pope
RE: Letters of recommendation

I am happy to provide letters of recommendation for graduate school and employment. My regular practice is to have the applicant write a first draft of the letter.

I do this, because you can highlight the professional and personal biographical details that you think the reader wants to know about. You can better link to emphasize other things that I might not even know about. In short, you can best tailor the letter to the intended audience.

In your draft, be sure to recite the bases for my assessment of your work (e.g. in 2 courses, RA). And be as concrete as possible in describing specific accomplishments (e.g. got an A, co-authored an article). There are some other useful tips in the attached article from the September 2013 issue of *National Jurist*.

Err on the side of writing a too-strong recommendation letter. I will edit your draft for content, style, and format. It is easier for me to cut details than to create them.

COMMENTARY

How can I help my law professors help my job search?

In this challenging job market, most law students know they have to be entrepreneurial to land a job. While a lot of students turn to friends, family and professional contacts to network, one of the most valuable assets is the faculty at your school. The most common way professors help is

by recommending students for judicial clerkships, fellowships or other positions.

There are three things you can do that will increase the chances your professor will write you a letter of recommendation:



BY SARAH E. RICKS

1. **Be engaged.** A professor is more likely to write a letter for a student who stands out. However, grades and class participation are not the only ways that can help you do so. You can distinguish yourself by delivering an eloquent moot court oral argument, exhibiting professionalism during a law practice simulation, taking on leadership positions in student organizations, demonstrating empathy during a live client interview, writing an insightful essay or providing effective representation in a pro bono project.
2. **Get to know your professors.** A professor who has worked with you in a seminar, clinic, legal writing or skills class, or supervised you in a pro bono project or externship, or hired you as a research assistant or teaching assistant may know your work better than professors who engage with you only in a large class. In choosing classes, read faculty bios and seek out professors who have legal expertise or legal experience that dovetail with your own interests. To get to know professors,



especially those who know you only from a large class, visit them during their office hours to discuss questions about the class or about law careers. Attend law-school functions and be sure to talk not just to your friends, but also the professors and administrators (and practicing lawyers).

3. **Ask early.** Give the professor reasonable time to draft the letter. Don't ask for it days before the letter is due. Keep in mind that some professors only agree to recommend a few students in a given clerkship year or fellowship year to avoid diluting the impact of the recommendation. So ask early.

Be flexible if the professor suggests that you apply for a different job. A professor who is reluctant to write you a recommendation for a federal clerkship may be willing to recommend you for a state trial court clerkship. A professor who thinks you may not be a good fit for a big law

firm may be willing to recommend you to a smaller firm.

A good versus a mediocre recommendation

Good letters or email recommendations go beyond general statements. The best recommendations include concrete information about specific accomplishments or characteristics of the applicant. To help your professor write a solid recommendation, offer to provide:

- A current resume.
- A current transcript, in part to jog the professor's memory of what grade you received in the professor's classes.
- A short description of what you are applying for (such as a position at an environmental law firm in Ohio or state intermediate level clerkships in Pennsylvania and New Jersey). That way, the professor can tailor the letter

to the correct audience.

- Bullet points reminding the professor of specific work you have done together. Examples: As a research assistant, you produced memos on X topics; in class, you participated in Y simulation; you wrote a paper on Z topic and received good feedback noting X; you did a pro bono assignment on Y topic that was challenging because of Z reason.
- Bullet points highlighting any particular information you would like emphasized, such as you have an extensive scientific background, you are the first in your family to go to graduate school, you held a part-time job throughout law school to help cover expenses.

Also be open about how the professor can help you. Your professor may be willing to email a recommendation for you to a practicing attorney who is the professor's former student, former law practice colleague or other contact. After you have made it past a screening interview, your professor may be especially willing to email a recommendation on your behalf.

Or the email may not be an overt recommendation. Instead, the professor may email a request that the attorney speak with you on the phone for 15 minutes or meet briefly for an informational interview, not for a particular position, but for general advice about pursuing a career in that field.

A professor who participates in professional organizations that interest you — such as specialized bar association committees or nonprofits — may be willing to bring you to a professional meeting to allow you to observe such work.

The professor may be connected to his or her own law school alumni network. In a rare situation, professors may be willing to email an alumni from their own law schools for a short informational interview. I have done that for students who wanted to relocate to faraway states for personal reasons and wanted to brainstorm career strategies with a lawyer established in that legal market.

Cold-calling judges

The judicial clerkship market is so competitive that many judges no longer open all of the applications. Some judges review

applications only from particular law schools.

But some judges will review applications if they receive a phone call from a professor advocating for that candidate. Obviously, your professor's advocacy will be more effective if the professor knows the judge or clerked for that judge. But if your professor is willing to pick up the

and not just because it is the right thing to do. A law school administrator or a professor — whether adjunct, assistant, clinical, legal writing or visiting — may have professional experience or professional connections that could benefit your search. Be pleasant to support staff. They were there before you and will be there long after you graduate. Professors and administrators

A professor who practiced in the field that interests you or is an expert in that field may be willing to brainstorm strategies with you. Make an appointment, be ready to explain what steps you already have taken and be open to new ideas.

phone to call a few judges on your behalf, even a cold call from a professor unknown to the judge can help get your application considered. I have cold-called many judges who have agreed to consider applications that might otherwise have remained unopened.

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Be sure to treat everyone with respect. That applies to everyone at the law school

may have loyal relationships with the staff. Mistreating them will reflect poorly on you and discourage professors from helping you.

The legal job markets your professors faced were not as challenging as the market you face. But your professors do want to help you land a job, and these suggestions should help your professors to help you pursue your career goals.

SARAH E. RICKS is a clinical professor at Rutgers School of Law-Camden. Before joining the faculty, she clerked for a federal judge and practiced law for 9 years.

If you don't remember why you went to law school

SHE DOES

DOWNED COWS · HOARDERS · OIL SPILL

These events have magnified the gap between how the legal system treats animals and the significant roles that animals play in our lives. Help close the gap. To find out how you can use your law degree to advocate on behalf of the voiceless, visit www.saldf.org and start or join a Student Animal Legal Defense Fund chapter today!

Animal Legal Defense Fund

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